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ABSTRACT

This document consists of the single 2001 issue of a journal reporting new research in early childhood development conducted by the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The issue focuses on pre-kindergarten programs, highlighting a recent assessment of the skills of entering kindergartners in North Carolina; a description of how five states established pre-K programs and what other states might learn from this process; a study of preschool programs for children with disabilities; and a survey of state early childhood coordinators regarding readiness assessment. The issue also lists recent publications from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center and the National Center for Early Development and Learning. (EV)

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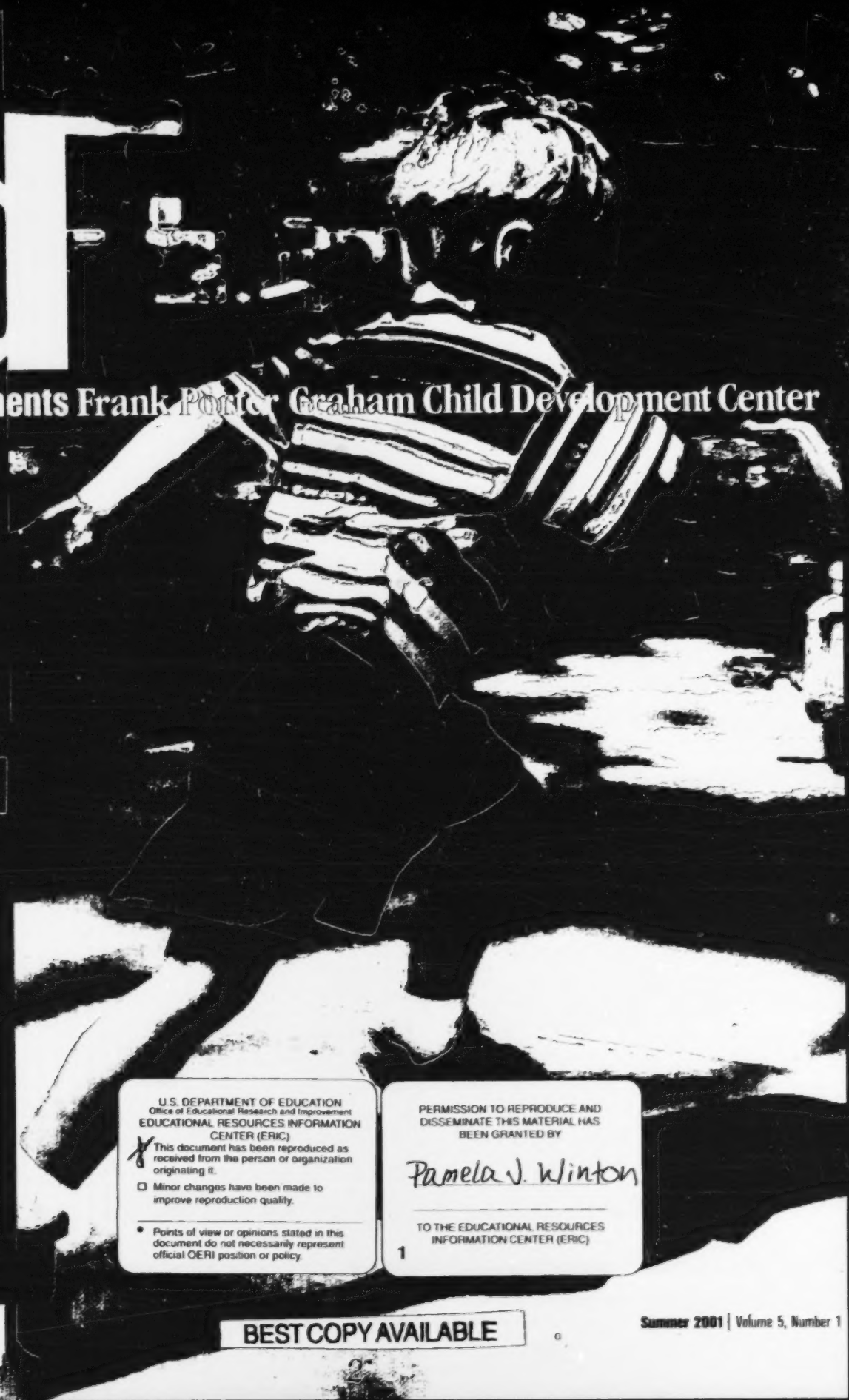

pre-Kindergarten

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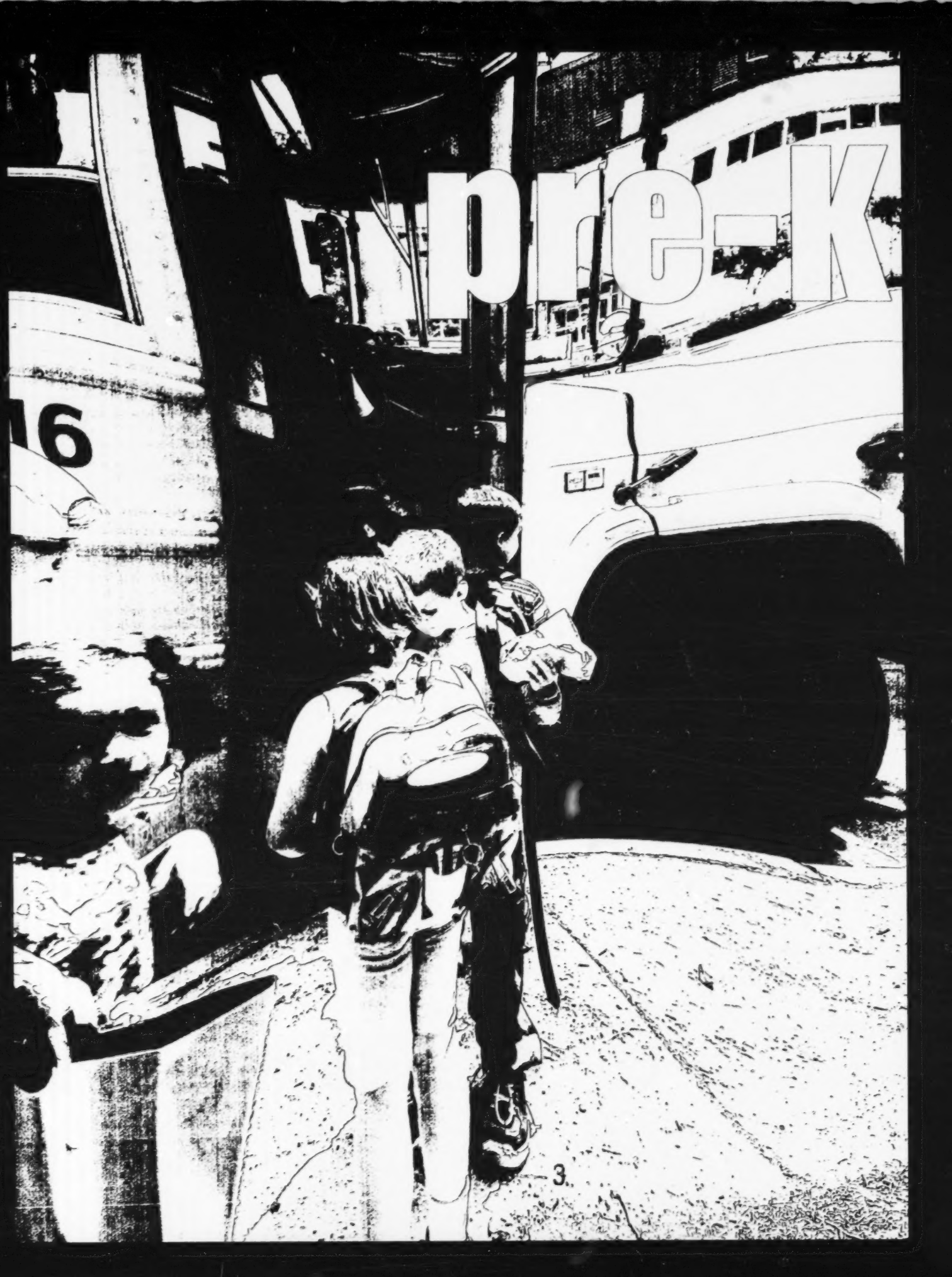
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at Issue

by Don Bailey Director, Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center

AS A 5-YEAR-OLD IN 1955, I DID NOT ATTEND KINDERGARTEN. I was living in a small town in South Carolina, which like many other states at that time did not have kindergarten programs available for all children. The first public kindergartens in the U.S. opened in the late 1800s, but it was not until the 1970s that kindergarten became widely available for all children. The growth of kindergartens was fueled in part by Sputnik and concerns about how the U.S. could keep ahead of other countries, and in part by concerns over the success of poor children in school.

The establishment of public school kindergarten was not without controversy. Many people felt that children did not need to be in school that young, and that it was the family's responsibility to raise and care for children until age 6.

And there was controversy over what might happen in kindergarten classes. Many were concerned that kindergarten would become too academic and that schools would not be sensitive to the developmental needs of young children.

Despite these concerns, today it is routinely accepted that all children will attend kindergarten and all schools will provide kindergarten.

Now in 2001, these same issues have appeared again, but the focus has shifted to younger children. Three primary factors have caused new attention to preschool education:

- First, there are concerns about the poor to mediocre quality of many childcare programs. Research showing that quality is important for all children has led some to argue that the only way to insure quality at a national level is to provide a comprehensive program of services for all young children.
- Second, in numerous surveys teachers report that a substantial proportion of children experience significant problems in the transition to kindergarten.
- And finally, the failure of many children to learn to read, the achievement gap between white children and children of color, and continued evidence of school failure for many children from low-income families have resulted in a call for increased attention to early education as one way to promote later school success for all children.

Should public schools take an active role in providing pre-K services and if so, for whom?

Although the majority of 3- and 4-year olds in the U.S. are in some type of out-of-home care setting, these settings vary widely in terms of quality and affordability. They include private, public and for-profit programs.

At issue today is whether public schools should take an active role in providing pre-K services, and if so, for whom? Almost every state is examining seriously this question. In the process, of course, the same issues that were discussed in the context of kindergarten are now being discussed in the context of pre-K.

- Is this a proper role for public schools?
- Will it mean that pre-K programs will shift to have more of an academic focus?
- What will be the source of funding for these programs?
- What will be the impact on the private child care community?
- Are pre-K programs really effective in promoting later school success?

In reality, many public schools are already in the business of pre-K education. A recent survey conducted by Gitanjali Saluja and Dick Clifford >

pre-K at Issue

here at FPG found that 42 states are currently funding some type of pre-K program through the public schools.

A variety of different models are being used, including state-funded Head Start programs (18 states), universal pre-K for all children (2 states), and pre-K for at-risk children (26 states).

Although some of these issues will be discussed at the national level, most of the action will be within individual states. As state legislators begin to weigh the costs and benefits of such programs, there will be an important need for data to help inform policy decisions.

This is an exciting time, an opportunity for all of us to think broadly about the needs of young children and their families.

No state has pre-K currently available for all children, although Georgia and New York are moving in this direction.

During the next decade, this issue will receive tremendous attention in the context of school reform, standards and accountability. In North Carolina, for example, a recent court ruling stated that public schools must provide for the education of all at-risk 4-year-olds in order to maximize their success in kindergarten and beyond.

In this issue of *Early Developments* we highlight some recent studies addressing this issue. Among these include a recent assessment of the skills of entering kindergartners in North Carolina; a description of how five states established pre-K programs and what other states might learn from this process; a study of preschool programs for children with disabilities; and a survey of state early childhood coordinators regarding readiness assessment.

In recognition of this need for information, FPG is committed to a program of work that helps provide the best data for policy makers. This includes information about state policies and funding possibilities, program models and characteristics, the status of children during and after pre-K programs and the transition to kindergarten.

For those of us in the early childhood field, this is an exciting time, an opportunity for all of us to think broadly about the needs of young children and their families. What will programs and services for young children look like in ten years? One thing is for sure. With all of the attention currently being paid to this issue, things are likely to change dramatically over the next few years.

Hopefully through research and thoughtful consideration, the next decade will result in more equitable access for all children and their families to high-quality, appropriate care and educational opportunities.

The same issues that were discussed in the context of kindergarten are now being discussed in the context of pre-K.

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Virginia Buysse, Pam Winton

Graphic Design
Turner McCallum

Circulation
Jay Hargrove

Photography
Don Trull

Writer
Loyd Little

Editorial Offices
521 South Greensboro Street
Suite 206
Carrboro, NC 27510

www.fpg.unc.edu
www.ncedl.org

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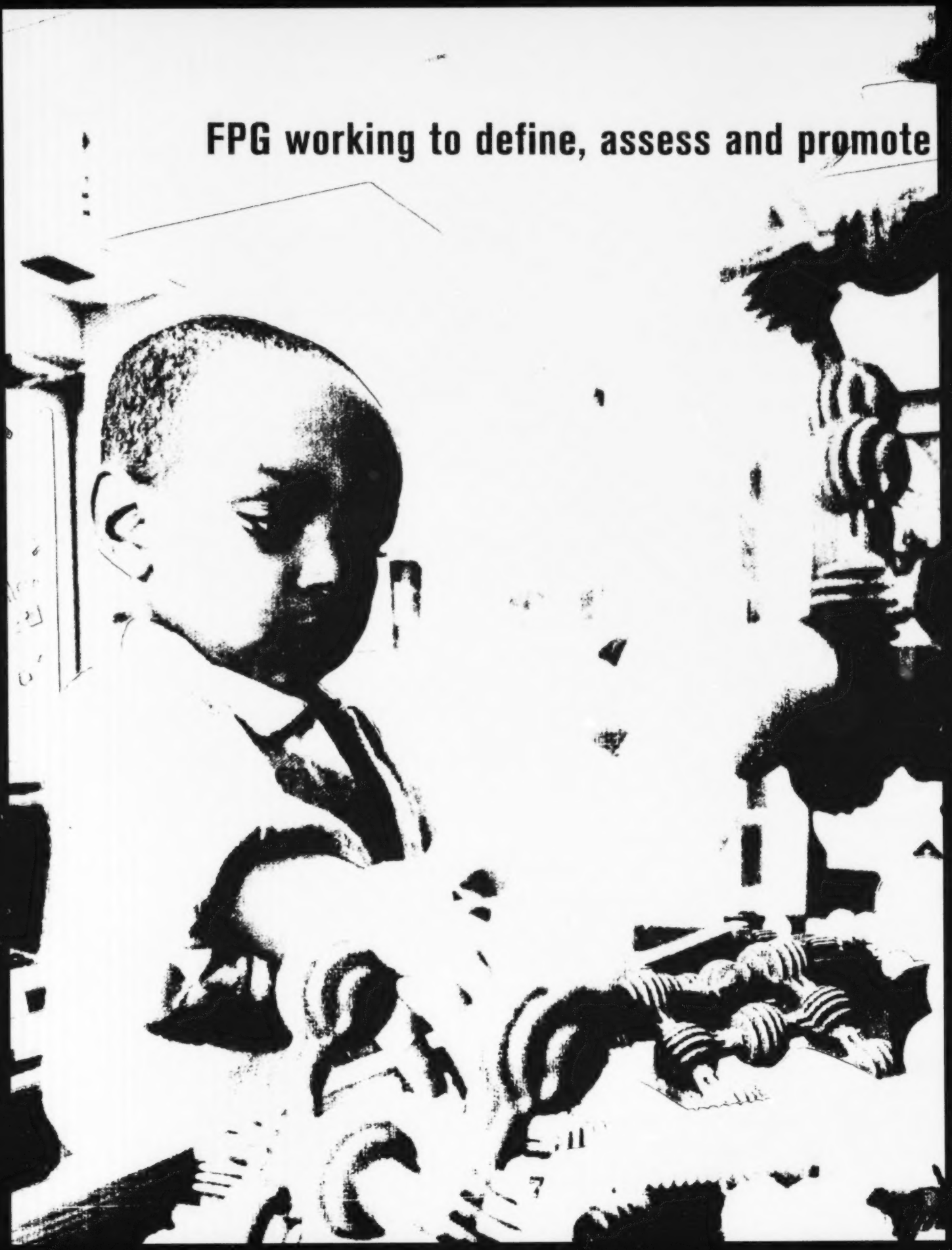

school readiness

SINCE 1990, ONE OF THE TOP NATIONAL EDUCATION GOALS HAS BEEN "all children in America should start school ready to learn."

And that has been true in North Carolina as well. From 1993 to 2000, Gov. Jim Hunt focused much of his energy on improving education. In fact, in 1999, the National Education Goals Panel singled out North Carolina as the state showing the most significant improvement during the 1990s. The state's performance improved on 14 of the panel's measures–more than any other state.

But improvement, while great, was not good enough for Hunt. In 1999, he challenged the state to build the "best system of public schools of any state in America" by 2010. A key component in his "First in America" challenge was "ready for school." The State Board of Education and the NC Partnership for Children (the organization charged with leading Smart Start, NC's early childhood initiative) were also very interested in school readiness issues.

These groups joined forces and created a statewide task force to develop a definition of school readiness and a plan for assessing school readiness. This task force, the NC Ready for School Goal Team, drew its members from the early childhood and public school communities and included researchers from the National Center for Early Development & Learning (NCEDL) and the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center (FPG), based at UNC-Chapel Hill: Donna Bryant, Dick Clifford, Kelly Maxwell, and Gitanjali Saluja.

Despite widespread agreement on the importance of school readiness, the nation and North Carolina have struggled to define what being ready for school means.

Kelly Maxwell, one of the FPG researchers on the team, said, "The team concluded, first, that there is no definition of school readiness that is used consistently across the country. We had to develop our own."

The team decided that school readiness is a puzzle with two pieces

- The *condition of children* when they enter school, and
- The *capacity of schools* to educate all children whatever each child's condition may be.

"The readiness puzzle," said Maxwell, "can only be solved if the two pieces fit together. We can improve the fit by enhancing both the condition of children as they enter school and the capacity of schools to educate the full range of children enrolled. Each piece of the puzzle is important in the Ready for School Goal Team definition of school readiness."

The team said that the *condition of children* must be considered across five domains:

1. Health and physical development
2. Social and emotional development
3. Approaches toward learning
4. Language development and communication
5. Cognition and general knowledge

"Several things need to be remembered," said Maxwell. "These five areas are linked together. No single area adequately represents a child's condition of readiness as he or she enters school. Also, development varies widely at age five. We should not expect all children to reach a common standard of readiness."

The team said that the *capacity of schools* must be considered across four cornerstones:

1. Knowledge of growth and development of typically and atypically developing children
2. Knowledge of the strengths, interests and needs of each child
3. Knowledge of the social and cultural contexts in which each child and family lives
4. Ability to translate developmental knowledge into developmentally appropriates practice

"Additionally," said Maxwell, "teachers and administrators in ready schools will have a nurturing atmosphere, use a curriculum that provides meaningful contexts for learning, and address the areas of >

'There is no definition of school readiness that is used consistently across the country.'

– NC Ready for School Goal Team

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children's development described earlier. They will also support practices that address the unique ways in which young children learn."

The NC Ready for School Team was also charged with coming up with ways to assess school readiness. The team agreed on these assessment conditions:

- Assessment should help, not harm children and schools.
- Assessment should include both pieces of the definition (children and schools).
- Assessment for different purposes requires different strategies. Instructional assessment provides information to help teachers effectively instruct each child. Accountability assessment can use samples of children to determine how well communities and the state are supporting children and families before kindergarten.

The goal team proposed specific measures of children and schools that could serve the accountability purpose. [Editor's note: *These specific measures may be found at fpg.unc.edu/~schoolreadiness/battery.pdf. Or email ~ SchoolReadiness@unc.edu. If you don't have access to the Internet, call Stephanie Ridley toll free at 800-822-8811.*]

The goal team also recommended that the state conduct a pilot study of the proposed assessment plan. The state agreed and a pilot study began in the fall of 2000 using the new NC School Readiness Assessment. Maxwell and FPG researcher Donna Bryant directed this pilot study, with assistance from Stephanie Ridley. Bryant is also co-director of the National Center for Early Development & Learning at UNC-Chapel Hill.

The pilot gathered information from a statewide representative sample of more than 1,000 children and about 200 schools. Information was collected on each of the five domains of children's development and on key components of schools' readiness for children. Principals, kindergarten teachers, parents and children took part in the assessment.

The study found that children from lower-income families in North Carolina entered school with much lower skills in all five major areas of development and learning.

"One of the major findings from this study is the gap in skills between children from lower-income families and higher-income families," said Maxwell. That gap is illustrated by these findings:

76% of children from lower-income families were rated by their parents as having very good or excellent health, vs. **91%** of children from higher-income families.

82% of children from lower-income families were rated by their parents as often or very often seeming eager to learn, vs. **94%** of children from higher-income families.

28% of children from lower-income families had very low scores on a measure of social skills, vs. **10%** of children from higher-income families.

38% of children from lower-income families had very low scores on a language measure, vs. **6%** of children from higher-income families.

37% of children from lower-income families had very low scores on measures of early math skills, vs. **9%** of children from higher-income families.>

skills between children from lower-income families and higher-income families.'

Kelly Maxwell

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The good news is that the study found that NC kindergartners were about the same as their peers nationally on measures of health, social skills and approaches toward learning. Highlights of the findings for NC kindergartners include:

85% of NC kindergartners were rated by their parents as being in very good or excellent health vs. **83%** nationally.

89% of NC kindergartners were rated by their parents as often or very often seeming eager to learn vs. **92%** nationally.

- The average social skills score for NC kindergartners was **97** vs. the national average of **100**. Compared to national norms, about the same number of NC children had very low social skills (**18%** in NC vs. **16%** nationally).
- On a measure of children's language skills, the average score for NC kindergartners was **97**, vs. the national average of **100**. Compared to national norms, more NC children had very low language skills (**21%** in NC vs. **16%** nationally).
- On measures of children's math skills, the average score for NC kindergartners was **95**, vs. the national average of **100**. Compared to national norms, more NC children had very low math skills (**22%** in NC vs. **16%** nationally).

Turning to the second piece of the definition, public schools in NC were similar to the national average on key factors such as kindergarten teachers' years of experience and class size. On average, NC kindergarten teachers had **11** years of experience. The average NC kindergarten class size was **21**, vs. the national average of **20**. However, the average class size was larger than the goal of 18 set by the US Department of Education. More NC principals had education beyond a Master's degree than their peers nationally.

Summarizing the implications of the study, Maxwell said, "We still have work to do to ensure that each child enters school ready to succeed and that schools have the capacity to educate all kindergartners." She urged an increased focus on services for young children from lower-income families.

Some of the recommendations made by the research team include:

- Prioritize high quality services for children birth through five who are at risk for school failure. "Preparing children for school starts at birth – not just the year before they come to school," Maxwell stated.
- Provide extra resources and supports for children at risk when they enter school. "Without extra help, these children will likely fall even further behind their peers from higher-income families," the report said.
- Support all children's development and learning in each of the five areas. "Each of the five areas is important, and children's development in one area is affected by their development in another. Families, early childhood programs, and public schools need to support children's development in *all* five areas," the report said.

"The findings from this study serve as a good benchmark from which to judge our state's progress over the next few years," said Bryant. "Periodic data on a statewide representative sample of kindergartners and schools will help us know whether the many early childhood improvement and intervention efforts are helping NC's children."

The Ready for School Goal Team has recommended that this assessment be conducted regularly at the state level as well as for each of NC's 100 counties. **[ed]**

[Editor's Note: The N.C. Kindergartners and Schools summary report and executive summary are online at fpg.unc.edu/~SchoolReadiness. Print copies can be ordered from the web site, by calling 1-888-822-8811, or by emailing schoolreadiness@unc.edu.]

Two projects at Frank Porter Graham Center examine professional development and quality improvements

If you want to know more

- Smart Start Evaluation Team at FPG
  www.fpg.unc.edu/~smartstart/
- NC state web site for Smart Start
  www.smartstart-nc.org/

Professional development

As the NC School Readiness Task Force observed, readiness is a two-part puzzle: children and schools. Improving teacher "readiness" through better inservice and preservice professional development has long been one of FPG's priorities.

One project that is on the cutting edge of research into professional development is the Literacy Environment Enrichment Project (LEEP) directed by FPG Researcher Ellen Peisner-Feinberg. "In collaboration with the Education Development Center in Newton, MA, we are testing distance learning technologies against traditional teaching to examine the impact on teachers' and supervisors' beliefs and practices and on children's literacy growth," said Peisner-Feinberg.

This year, participants in the LEEP program will receive training through the traditional classroom structure. Next year the same course will be taught through distance learning. Evaluation will compare the different models to one another as well as to a control group of teachers not participating in the training. Data will be gathered to examine the literacy practices and overall quality of the classrooms as well as children's growth in language and literacy skills over the course of the year.

Quality improvements

As part of its policy-related research, FPG helps evaluate the statewide Smart Start initiative, the overall goal of which is to ensure that children are prepared to succeed when they enter school. In a recent study of children in six Smart Start counties, FPG evaluators found that the program helps boost children's thinking and language skills when compared with those of children not connected with the effort. Researchers found statistically significant and meaningful improvements in skills for entering kindergartners who attended child care centers that were involved in Smart Start quality improvement efforts. However, this finding was true only for those centers that used Smart Start money to directly improve classroom quality.

Study director Donna Bryant said, "Seventeen percent of children not attending Smart Start centers had low cognitive skills, but only 9 percent of children who attended Smart Start centers had low skills." "On a behavior rating by teachers, 18 percent of children not attending Smart Start centers had behavior problems whereas only 10 percent of Smart Start children did."

The study gathered information about the thinking, language and social skills of 508 kindergartners. "The results of this multi-county study support earlier single-county studies of the positive effects of Smart Start on NC children," Bryant said. "They also suggest that the type, not just the quantity, of Smart Start support matters. Efforts directly related to improving the day-to-day quality of child care are most likely to have an effect on children's school entry skills." Previous FPG studies have shown that the quality of child care in North Carolina is gradually improving, that more NC children are enrolled in higher-quality child-care programs, and that interagency collaboration has improved since Smart Start began. Information about FPG/UNC Smart Start evaluation and copies of many of the reports are available at www.fpg.unc.edu/~smartstart.

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Pre-K Children with Special Needs

New survey examines preschool programs for children with disabilities

ALTHOUGH PRE-K PROGRAMS ARE THE LATEST HOT TOPIC OF DEBATE in many states, preschool for children with disabilities has been a reality in the US for more than 15 years. In 1975, the federal Education for All Handicapped Children Act laid the foundation for preschool programs by providing initiatives and guidelines for states. In 1986, states were mandated to provide a free, appropriate, public education for all 3-and 4-year olds with disabilities.

To capture a picture of the services offered to preschoolers with disabilities in NC, FPG researchers studied all 117 of NC's local education agencies (LEAs). More than 350 preschool teachers and 520 support service personnel, including speech-language pathologists, physical therapists and occupational therapists completed a lengthy survey about the services they provided to preschoolers.

On-site visits to 22 preschool classrooms were made to complete an *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R)* and to collect a measure of child engagement. Investigators were Sharon Palsha, Mark Wolery, Don Bailey and research assistant Margaret Brashers.

Synopses of findings

Intensity of services

NC's school systems use a variety of arrangements to provide services to preschoolers with disabilities. For example, Amanda is a 4-year old with Down syndrome and is among about 4,500 NC preschoolers served in preschool programs operated by the NC Dept. of Public Instruction. She attends a self-contained classroom (children with disabilities only) which is the most prevalent service available across the state. The study found about 2,000 preschoolers served in this arrangement.

About 800 preschoolers with disabilities attend inclusive public school classrooms. Children in inclusive settings spend more hours at school than the children who attend self-contained classrooms.

Another 1,400 children receive itinerant services. These services typically involve the itinerant teacher making two 30-minute visits per week to the child's regular day care program. The study found only a small number of preschoolers (129) receiving home-based services, which usually involved one 1-hour visit per week to the child's home.

Parent participation

Amanda's parents are actively involved in the Individualized Education Plan (IED) process, parent meetings and volunteering in the classroom. Most systems reported parent participation in these activities. Few systems, however, reported parent participation in evaluating the preschool program or in setting policies and procedures.

Transportation services

Amanda spends about 15 minutes in route to her classroom each morning driven by her mother and 20 minutes going home in the afternoon via the school bus. The study reported that the majority of children spend a reasonable amount of time being transported to and from school.

A third of the coordinators at preschool programs, however, said that transportation is "often a problem" or an "extremely big problem." Two hundred and sixty preschoolers across the state were reported as spending more than one hour being transported one way.

Child transition

Amanda will be moving on to kindergarten next year. Fortunately for Amanda and her family, her program uses a large number of recommended transition practices. The study found this to be true for most of the responding systems.

Examples of transition activities include holding transition meetings with the

family, holding meetings with kindergarten personnel, and inviting kindergarten teachers to the IEP meeting.

Respondents reported that more than three-fourths of their preschoolers from the previous school year aging out of the program were placed in a regular kindergarten and another 14% spent at least some time in a regular kindergarten. Only 53% of the systems report that the preschool program continues to provide support to the child during the kindergarten year.

Preschool teachers

Amanda's preschool teacher is only responsible for her one self-contained classroom. This is the typical practice across the state. The study found, however, that about a quarter of the full-time teachers and a fifth of the part-time teachers had multiple teaching assignments.

The teachers were almost exclusively Caucasian females. Two-thirds of the teachers held a bachelor's degree and one third held a master's. About three-quarters held a birth-kindergarten license.

Preschool coordinators

Coordinators in LEAs reported having a range of other responsibilities with close to half (42%) indicating that they also provided direct services to preschoolers. They are almost exclusively female (95%) and Caucasian (90%). As a group the coordinators are well educated, with the majority holding a master's degree. More than half (56%) hold birth-kindergarten or preschool handicapped certification.

Related service personnel

Therapists serving the preschoolers with disabilities tend to be female and Caucasian. Speech-language pathologists and occupational therapists tend to be full-time employees of their school system. Therapists are moderately to substantially involved in a number of the IEP activities.

IEP development, monitoring

Amanda's parents actively participate in the IEP process and suggest goals for their daughter. This behavior was atypical of what was reported in our study. The majority of teachers reported that less than half of their preschoolers' parents suggested or asked for a modification of an IEP goal for their child.

Teachers typically gave parents formal feedback on IEP goals every nine weeks. More than half of the preschoolers acquired three-fourths of their IEP goals.

Classroom observations

The ECERS-R data suggest that the observed inclusive classes overall were of good quality and were of higher quality than the self-contained classes. For each category, with the exception of parents and staff, the inclusive classes had higher mean scores than did the self-contained classes. Statistically significant differences occurred in 3 of the 7 ECERS-R categories, all in the direction of the inclusive classrooms having higher quality.

Typical, ideal practices

Amanda's physical therapy and speech-language therapy both take place in her classroom in the context of her daily classroom activities. Related service personnel reported that at least half of all therapy should be provided in the child's regular class and in the context of ongoing classroom routines and activities, but that this was not currently happening. Therapists said they should work with almost all teachers to help them individualize classroom instruction based on therapy goals and needs, but that this happened with only about half the teachers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study included specific recommendations in each of the above areas. These include:

PARENT PARTICIPATION: Parent participation is a critical component of a preschool program, and therefore every effort should be made to encourage parents to be involved actively in their child's preschool life. The study recommended that the schools offer their diverse parent population a range of options in which to participate at the systems, policy, program, classroom, and child level. Systems should have IEP procedures in place that encourage parents to offer IEP goals for their child.

TRANSITION POLICIES: It is important that systems have policies and procedures in place to support children and their families not just in the transition form preschool to kindergarten, but also during the kinder-garten year so that placement into the school-age program meets with the greatest success for the child and family.

TRANSPORTATION: Transportation is an important, yet challenging, part of the preschool program. Coordinators, teachers and parents all should be aware of the length of time preschoolers spend being transported to school. In cases where there are problems all of these parties should work together to explore solutions.

MORE INCLUSION: The findings from the on-site observations suggest that the NC preschool program should strongly consider moving toward a model offering more inclusive classrooms. Inclusive classrooms overall offered better quality. Integrated therapy: If therapists serving preschoolers want to follow the field's recommended practices, they would provide more integrated therapy than is now provided. Systems should analyze staff development activities that break down the barriers to providing integrated therapy. Given the discrepancy between the therapists' typical and ideal practice in helping classroom teachers individualize instruction, systems need to provide therapists and teachers with the time and resources to consult on therapy IEP goals.

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If you want to know more

NCEDL Spotlight No. 6:
Disabilities & Transitions,
published by NCEDL
www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot6.pdf

NCEDL Spotlight No. 25:
Early childhood support structure is proposed, published by NCEDL
www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot25.pdf

NCEDL Spotlight No. 15:
"Early Intervention: What's Next?"
www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot15.pdf

National Center for Early Development and Learning

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STATE INITIATIVES

Lessons learned in trailblazing pre-K programs

SOME STATES HAVE ESTABLISHED PRE-K PROGRAMS AND OTHERS HAVE NOT. As states without pre-K classes consider such a change, it would help to know what features have facilitated this policy shift in other states.

To answer this, NCEDL researchers examined how five states – Georgia, Illinois, New York, South Carolina and Texas – made major educational shifts by establishing pre-K programs for four-year-olds.

Key figures in political and educational circles were interviewed to determine the major facilitators to this policy shift, the barriers to be overcome, and strategies used to make these policy changes. These states appear to be well on the way to universal pre-K services as soon as they find a way to finance the programs, according to researchers James J. Gallagher, Jenna R. Clayton and Sarah E. Heinemeier.

The study – *Education for four-year olds. State initiatives* – is published by NCEDL as a 65-page technical report, and includes a 14-page executive summary.

Generalities from the five

Researchers cited these major commonalities among how these 5 states approached pre-K programs:

Political leadership

In each case, powerful political figures lead the way. In South Carolina and Georgia, the governor spearheaded this effort. In New York, the influential speaker of the assembly was the major force behind the program. In Texas, a special study commission appointed by the governor and headed by Ross Perot provided the impetus. In Illinois, a number of key legislators played an important role and were helped by key advocacy groups.

Early school failures

In each state, a key reason for initiating the program was that a number of children in that state were identified as failing in the early grades. The prospect of continued poor school performance and possible later dependence on the

larger society was a motivating force in identifying such children early and providing a stimulating pre-K program.

Reform packages
One political strategy used in each state was embedding the pre-K program in a larger package of educational reform.

Grassroots support
Professional child care providers and Head Start teachers had to be convinced that no harm would come to them or their interests. Considerable effort was expended to make sure that these groups supported the new policy.

Other commonalities

- The media made an insignificant impact in these states.
- There was no visible role for higher education in the decision.
- Basically, the political forces and professional education and child care groups worked out the program strategies.
- The general public seemed moderately positive towards the move. There were few instances of general public endorsement or protest, with the exception of some on the Christian right who believed the program undermined family values and that the child was better off with his/her mother than with a teacher or child care provider.

Major differences

Researchers cited these major differences among how these states approached pre-K programs:

Finance: Georgia established a lottery with the proceeds earmarked for the program. In Texas, the program has been in place so long that is now part of the state's continuing budget. In Illinois, the program budget has to be considered anew each year. In New York, the universal pre-K is on a five-year phase-in process. South Carolina raised the state sales tax a penny to pay for this and other education reforms.

Gradual versus sudden: Illinois and Texas each had a gradually developing and expanding program. Georgia established its universal program in a very short time. The gradual approach allowed states to reach agreements with the various professional groups and get the public accustomed to the program. On the other hand, the passage of time lets opposition coalesce and build their case.

Organizational support systems: States either set up a separate office or maintained an identifiable unit in the state department of education to administer the program. The structures varied considerably from a near one-person early childhood department (Texas and New York) to Georgia's separate Office of School Readiness, which is well funded and well staffed. Some states like South Carolina allow much more flexibility at the local level on the nature of the program and staffing. NCEDL

Advice to states wishing to begin or extend pre-K

Based on the experiences of the five states (Georgia, Texas, New York, Illinois and South Carolina) NCEDL researchers offered this advice to states wishing to begin or expand pre-kindergarten programs:

Link with larger educational reform

These five states found it useful to embed the four-year-old program in a larger package of education reform. This appeared to divert criticism or opposition and to mute the perception of the costs of the program. In some cases, the pre-K program was linked with raises in teachers' salaries. In others, it joined hands with increases in technology and other education initiatives.

Importance of early childhood

Most states began the pre-K program with vulnerable populations, children at risk for school failure. Once the benefits for at-risk children had been noted, it was natural for parents of children not at risk to wonder why their children weren't receiving these services.

Political leadership and support

Since such pre-K programs cost considerable money (though saving money in the long run), it was important that key political leaders directly support the program. It is also wise to make the support bipartisan, if at all possible.

Gradual introduction

Unless a source is available that would not stress other state budget considerations, there is a tendency to introduce the idea and program gradually.

Transportation

One factor often overlooked in the planning has been transportation. While public schools accept responsibility for transportation, this has been left out of pre-K planning in some instances.

Infrastructure data systems

A natural step in policy development is to assure that direct services to children are taken care of, but to overlook the support structure that is so important to a quality program. A good example is the lack of a data system. Without such a system, state planners are in the dark when it comes to needed resources and legislators are in the dark about the viability of the requests being made.

Program quality assurance

Establishing standards such as certification of key staff members and developing technical assistance personnel to improve the overall quality of the program are two strategies that support high quality pre-K programs. Such standards result in greater public support and acceptance for the overall program.

Collaboration with stakeholders

The successful programs took pains to allay the natural anxieties of child care service providers. The perception that two or three institutions will fight over who will care for four-year-olds can bring forth political opposition. All five states encouraged various efforts to bring about collaboration among these stakeholders.

Other forces at work

Two other social movements added support to these policy changes. The large percentage of mothers in the workforce and requirements that welfare mothers go to work left parents searching for constructive environments for their young children. NCEDL

If you want to know more...

Education for four-year-olds State initiatives online at:

www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EdFours-tr.pdf (65-page PDF file)

www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/EdFours-es.pdf (14-page summary)

www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot29.pdf (2-page Spotlight No.29)

If you would like a printed copy of any of the above, call Publications Office at 919-966-4221, or email pubs@mail.fpg.unc.edu

Appropriate Assessment of Readiness

A SURVEY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD STATE REPRESENTATIVES in all 50 states indicates that efforts to minimize the misuse of readiness assessment tools may have had some impact at the state level, according to researchers at the National Center for Early Development & Learning.

Respondents to NCEDL's survey generally indicated an increased awareness of recommended early childhood assessment practices, according to Gitanjali Saluja and Richard Clifford, both at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Also working on the survey was Catherine Scott-Little of SERVE, the Regional Education Laboratory based at UNC-Greensboro.

Survey results indicated that although several states are studying readiness, no state had a formal, statewide definition of readiness for school. Many states are trying to clarify the difference between readiness testing and screening.

Rather than using readiness assessment for placement decisions, many states reported developing readiness assessment systems to profile children as they enter school or to design classroom activities to better meet the needs of children.

Other key findings as of January 2000:

- Five states said that local districts may have formal definitions for school readiness. Five states reported they had frameworks or benchmarks to describe readiness.
- Six states said they believed states should place emphasis on schools being ready for all children.
- Thirteen states said that they conduct statewide screening when children enter kindergarten. Twenty-six said that they did not mandate readiness assessments, but local districts may choose to assess children prior to, or as they enter kindergarten.
- Twelve states said they used data collected on children prior to kindergarten for instructional purposes. Seven said the data help identify high-need schools and improve outcome and services for children in families in need.

Discussion

While the work that many states have done in the area of school readiness is significant, two fundamental issues have been largely unaddressed:

1. **The importance of schools being ready for all children.** While several survey respondents indicated that their state emphasizes the importance of schools being ready for all children, only one state reported efforts to incorporate assessment of schools into their school readiness assessment system. Yet, school readiness can play a critical role in explaining children's performance in later grades. To gain a true assessment of school readiness, data must be collected on both children and schools.
2. **The role of the local district.** Many respondents indicated that local districts have a great deal of latitude in (1) how children are assessed when they enter school and (2) how data from these assessments are used. Data on how local districts are assessing children are scarce. These assessment strategies are likely to vary in quality. Some may use standardized assessment strategies, while others may use instruments that are locally developed and have not been tested for validity and reliability. Further research is needed to determine more about the role of local districts.

[continued on page 20]

Pros and Cons

on assessing readiness

One highly charged issue today is whether and how states should assess children's readiness for schools.

Advocates of readiness testing say that such results can identify children who are at risk for an unsuccessful entry into kindergarten. By assessing readiness, children can be provided needed assistance early.

Opponents say that testing may not be the best indicator of young children's development and that tests could be used to exclude some children from kindergarten. They say that all children are ready for kindergarten by age 5, and it is the responsibility of kindergartens to adopt to the needs of each individual child.

Readiness assessment should

- Benefit children and the adults who work with children
- Be used for the purposes for which they are designed. ("Screenings" should not be used for skills assessment.)
- Be valid and reliable
- Be age-appropriate, using naturalistic observations to collect information as children interact in "real life" situations
- Be holistic, collecting information on all developmental domains (physical, social, emotional and cognitive)
- Be linguistically and culturally appropriate
- Collect information through a variety of processes and multiple sources (collection of children's work, observations of children, interviews with children, parent reports, etc.)
- Be used to guide instruction and not to determine children's placement in school

The above are from a 2000 position statement by the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education.

The National Education Goals Panel has endorsed the following: "Ready schools should have strong leadership, strive for continuity between early care and education programs, promote smooth transitions between home and school, be committed to the success of *every* child as well as every teacher and adult who interacts with children at school, use approaches that have been shown to raise children's achievement and then alter practices and programs if they do not benefit children." >

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Assessing Readiness

[continued from page 18]

Implications for research and policy makers

- Results from this survey indicate a need for education on principles of early childhood assessment and for additional research.
- Efforts need to be made to inform policy makers and educators on recommended assessment strategies and how the data from the assessments should be used.
- Research on early childhood assessment must be translated into a format that can be used by policy makers as they design readiness assessment systems.
- Safeguards such as random sampling must be built into assessment systems to ensure that

  (1) assessments provide valid information

  (2) the information is used in a manner consistent with good early childhood practice.

If you want to know more

Spotlight # 26:
State policies on readiness surveyed.
Online: www.fpg.unc.edu/~ncedl/PDFs/spot26.pdf

Readiness for school: A survey of state policies and definitions. Saluja, G., Scott-Little, C., Clifford, R.M. (2001). *Early Childhood Research and Practice.*
www.ecrp.uiuc.edu/index.html

National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education. (2000). *Still! Unacceptable trends in kindergarten entry and placement.*
www.ericps.crc.uiuc.edu/naecs/position_trends2000.html

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National Education Goals Panel (1991). *The Goal 1 Technical Planning Subgroup report on school readiness.* Washington,D.C.

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New directions

MUCH ATTENTION IS BEING GIVEN TO PRE-K PROGRAMS OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS. In many states, public schools are examining what role they will play in pre-K education and many different models are being tried. What are these programs like? In order to help answer that question, NCEDL has received $11 million to launch a major new study of prekindergarten programs linked to public schools.

The new three-year grant was announced by the National Institute on Early Childhood Development and Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement in the U.S. Department of Education.

The center is based at the UNC-Chapel Hill, with key collaborators at the University of California at Los Angeles and the University of Virginia.

Since its founding in 1996, NCEDL has examined effective practices in caring for and educating young children, determined how those practices are being used, identified barriers to them, and tested results and models for improvement, said Richard Clifford, co-director of the center with Donna Bryant. Both are senior scientists at the Graham center and professors in UNC's School of Education.

"One specific area of our work has been the quality of child care and its effects on children during their preschool and early school years," Clifford said. "Public prekindergarten will be the focus of NCEDL through early 2004."

Bryant said, "With 42 states already serving some of their four-year-olds in state-funded programs and most states considering expansion, the country needs more information about effective models."

NCEDL investigators estimate that nearly a million pre-K children are served in programs located in or linked to public elementary schools. Some programs focus on children from low-income families; others are universal. Standards such as teacher training, class size and duration of program vary considerably.

"We need to know more about how these differences affect children's experiences in prekindergarten and their transition into the beginning school years," said Bryant.

The center's extended research into prekindergarten will focus on a sample of pre-K classes from California, Ohio, New York, Illinois, Georgia and Kentucky. Researchers will assess those children and their classrooms with emphasis on literacy, math and social skills development several times before first grade, and documenting transition activities of the schools and early childhood programs.

"We expect to have a much clearer understanding of the relationship between specific instructional practices in pre-K and kindergarten classes and children's language, cognitive and social development," Clifford said.

Carollee Howes and Robert Pianta head the UCLA and UVA teams, respectively.

NCEDL awarded $11 million to launch a major new study of pre-K programs linked to public schools

NCEDL is one of 12 national centers funded by the U.S. Department of Education to conduct research into significant problems in education. It is the only center that focuses on early childhood.

NCEDL is supported under the Education Research and Development Centers Program, PR/award number R307A60004, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education.

The center's extended research into prekindergarten will focus on a sample of pre-K classes from California, Ohio, New York, Illinois, Georgia and Kentucky.

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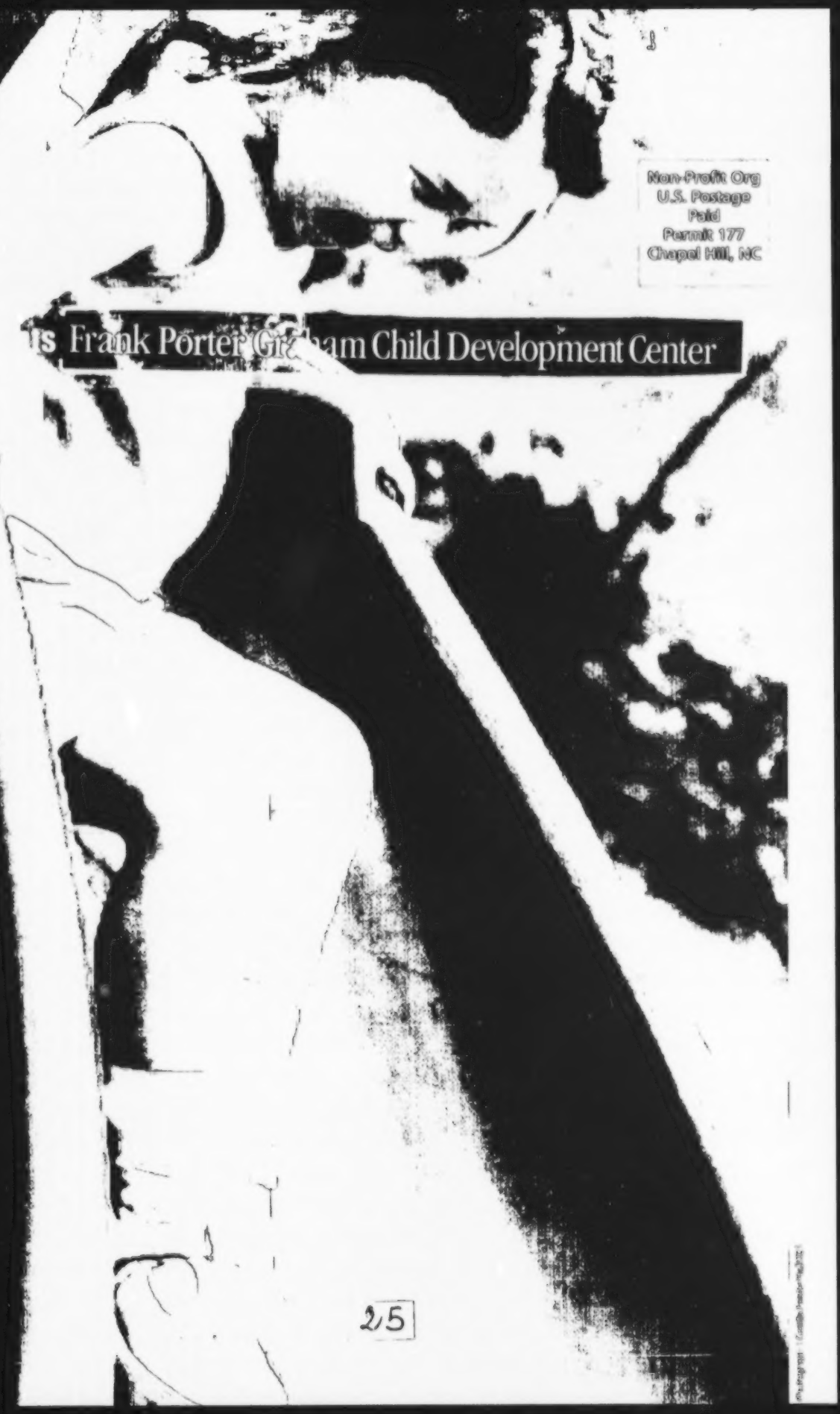

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